

Portuguese working group advocacy for intergenerational policies: challenges and results

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to present the benefits and challenges of the advocacy group for intergenerational policies that was created in Portugal in 2012, the European Year of Active Ageing and solidarity between generations.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The group conducted nine closed group meetings scheduled every three months with an average attendance of five members and six public events bringing together researchers, policy makers, practitioners and civil society.*

Findings – *The group was established as a response to the various social changes happening in Portugal as a consequence of the ageing population, low-birth rate and migration, leading to the need to explore new responses which are based both on the need to promote active ageing and intergenerational solidarity and also the importance of family and state support to multigenerational families as a building block to strengthen communities.*

Research limitations/implications – *The paper sets the context of the changing social situation in Portugal, describes the process used through both closed and public meetings to discuss this and then describes the perspectives of four core groups.*

Practical implications – *Only by pooling resources and thinking intergenerationally will we be able to deliver the opportunities and support that the citizens will need to enable them to age well across the life course.*

Social implications – *Drawing on this and the strong tradition of the family in Portugal it seeks to make the case that an intergenerational approach is essential to the countries future social well-being.*

Originality/value – *The creation of the advocacy group created a private space for professionals to explore and strengthen their understanding of the impact of these issues and the potential of approaching policy as an intergenerational issue as one solution.*

Keywords Portugal, Ageism, Advocacy, Active ageing, Intergenerational policies

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In Portugal there are two key factors that drive the need to advocate for an intergenerational approach to policy: these are the increasing challenges of our ageing population and the ageism which is a strong part of our culture. According to Census data from 2011, Portugal presents significant demographic change, with a senior population (≥ 65) of 19.15 per cent and an average life expectancy at birth of 79.2 years. By 2050 it is expected that this will have risen to 35.72 per cent seniors with an average life expectancy of 81 years. Portugal has to face the dual challenges of an increased life expectancy and simultaneously low fertility. An increasing concern is that this may lead to a conflict between generations over the distribution of resources. The perception is that ageing populations set up the potential for resource competition between age groups.

The concerns in health and social service programmes and benefit systems increase the need to consider cost-effective and fair solutions (Vliet, 2011).

The impact of public policies in different sectors (health, social, education, family, urbanistic, financial) means that when comparing today's Portuguese total fertility rate to earlier periods we find a drastic reduction in this population indicator. In fact, in 2010 Portugal had a total fertility rate of only 1.37 children per woman (Instituto Nacional de Estatística (INE), 2013), which is economically unsustainable value given we need a total fertility rate of 2.1 children per woman to allow the necessary minimum for the replacement of generations (European Commission, 2011). Portugal is experiencing a serious demographic crisis.

On the other hand ageism, discrimination against age has become a major social problem. According to the European Social Survey (Abrams *et al.*, 2011), in which 2,367 respondents were Portuguese, ageism constituted a serious problem for 61 per cent of respondents, and on a scale of 0 to 10, they give 7.9 importance to the control of prejudice regarding age.

According to Hatton-Yeo *et al.* (2000) intergenerational programmes can have a significant impact in different areas of public policies such as: first, economy and employment (intergenerational distribution of public funds and services; pre and post-retirement training opportunities with tax benefits for companies that implement them; the care services to seniors create work for young people and adults); second, society (contributing to social cohesion, solidarity and the economy through support services for seniors); third, education (a multigenerational sharing of educational resources leads to a cost-effective investment); and fourth, health (positive effects on seniors health leads to cost reductions in health and reduces poverty).

Reflecting this there has been over recent years in Portugal an increased awareness for intergenerational issues and a growth in the number of initiatives seeking to address this. For example, the programme "Aconchego", in English "Cosiness", established in Porto in 2004, provides homeshare accommodation for students in senior's homes (Federação Académica do Porto, 2004) and this has been extended to Coimbra with the project "Lado a Lado", in English "Side by Side", since 2009 (Associação Académica de Coimbra, 2009). With the aim of decreasing elderly isolation, the senior offers housing to a student looking for accommodation and in turn receives company and help.

During 2008 and 2009, a volunteering project called "Jovens Solidários", in English "Solidarity Youth", under the programme "Complemento Solidário para Idosos", in English "Solidarity Supplement for the Elderly", was carried out in Aveiro district, with the aim of young people helping older people to understand the process and to complete the application form to apply for the supplement (Instituto Português da Juventude, 2009). In 2010 two other projects were carried out "Criar laços" and "Projecto de Voluntariado", in English "Create Bonds" and "Volunteer Project", in Coimbra and Malveira, respectively (Fundação AMI, 2010). These aimed to provide social support for older people and to promote contact between generations through recreational, knowledge, information and technological activities. In 2010 in Lisbon the project "Ligar gerações", in English "Connecting Generations", was initiated in order to help prevent mental health problems in children, young and old people, through the development of computer workshops that promoted access to potentially excluded groups to the new information and communication technologies (Caixa Geral de Depósitos, 2010).

The "Vencer o tempo nas 7 cidades", in English, "Winning Time in 7 Cities", which took place between 2011 and 2013 in some districts in the north of Portugal, aimed to raise awareness and apply the concept of age-friendly cities, and establish solidarity networks of mutual respect and understanding between the older people and young people with the initiative "my senior friend", this gained the distinction of recognition by the World Health Organisation (Instituto de Estudos Sociais e Económicos, 2012). There are other volunteer projects such as the "Afectos", in English "Affections Project", at the health centre of Queluz (Operação Queluz, 2008), and the project "Voluntariado Intergeracional de Proximidade", in English "Intergenerational Volunteer Proximity" in a number of districts (European Commission, 2012). In 2012, Gonçalves established the "Intergenerational University" within a research university in Lisbon, a programme under the new intergenerational learning paradigm where participants from different generations learn scientific skills together (Gonçalves, 2013; Gonçalves and Farcas, 2014).

While we have a number of such examples, particularly stimulated by the 2012 European Year in general in Portugal we continue to have a siloed approach to public policy. This makes developing integrated approaches problematic as the focus is on separate policy areas. By its nature intergenerational work is cross-cutting requiring a connected and coherent approach to public policy. In 2000, Bostrum *et al.* affirmed there were problems with the creation of integrated that spanned a number of departmental areas policies and in the formulation of programmes and resources by various sectors and agents at a local and national level. A city for all ages (Vliet, 2011), an urban development based on an integrated approach to the needs of all the generations potentially enables a more efficient use of human, physical and financial resources. Such an initiative requires synergies across a number of policy areas such as: appropriate regulations (e.g. tax relief, transportation); safe and accessible environments (e.g. cross-walks); governance and civic engagement (e.g. decision-making processes); cross-departmental planning and sharing of resources; and cultural change (e.g. social marketing), which have implications for the physical, social and economic environments and for the service, governance and civic engagement systems (Vliet, 2011).

In 2012 to begin to understand better the implications of such an approach and how it might be achieved we created in Portugal a working group entitled “Advocacy for intergenerational policies”. This group emerged from the shared vision of a group of professionals to understand the significance and potential of promoting intergenerational policies. The aim of the group was to promote social dialogue and good practices in terms of intergenerational relationships and to create an evidence base for intergenerational policies.

One of the group members had consultative status with Economic and Social Council at the United Nations and participates in the UN working groups and meetings, seeking to encourage member states to promote policies that strengthen social integration and intergenerational solidarity through investment in cross-generational facilities and intergenerational learning. This helped to inform our considerations. The advocacy group has undertaken a number of studies and consultative events aimed particularly at stimulating the bridge between science, practice, policy and civil society. In this paper we present the benefits and challenges that have emerged from the work of the advocacy group.

The main social challenges encountered in the dialogue between researchers, policy makers, practitioners and civil society.

Between 2012 and 2014 we held nine closed group meetings scheduled every three months with an average presence of five members, and six public events bringing together researchers, policy makers, practitioners and civil society. The nine group meetings allowed the creation of a cohesive group and had as outputs: first, the group agreed term’s of reference with background, aims, strategies and expected results; second, the organisation of and participation at several national and international events and conferences (e.g. United Nations Committee on the Family, Austria, 2012; European Commission DG Joint Research Centre, Institute for Health and Consumer Protection, Public Health Policy Support, Italy, 2013; European Congress of Psychology, Sweden, 2013; European Conference on Developmental Psychology, Switzerland, 2013; International Conference of the Association of Psychology & Psychiatry for Adults & Children, Greece, 2014; International Congress of Applied Psychology, France, 2014); third, the submission of projects and awards applications; and fourth, the participation in social media.

Concerning the six public events we organised: in 2012 the first event on the awareness about promoting intergenerational policies; in 2013 the second event on the solidarity between generations in a changing society and the third on family and ageing by promoting social integration and intergenerational solidarity; and in 2014 the fourth event on the recognition of family as the first intergenerational context, the fifth on the meaning of an intergenerational university and the sixth on drug addiction, ageing, intergenerational relations and exclusion.

The main social challenges encountered in the dialogue between researchers, policy makers, practitioners and civil society were:

1. There is a need to replace the attitude of separation (families, generations, citizens) by the attitude of integration (people have to come together and society has to be emotionally intelligent, a synergy).

2. The main tasks are to combat age discrimination, to educate and train older people and families, to eliminate compulsive retirement and to review periodically social security systems.
3. The problem is not in ageing, which is natural, but in society, which cannot deal with ageing. We talk of the family fundamental, but our culture and behaviour goes against family solidarity.
4. The pressures and challenges of our society has meant that people may be more vulnerable to factors such as drug abuse or alcohol dependency.

Social change in Portugal has made it essential to reconsider our current social realities. In particular it is important to consider and understand new practices, which are based on the active aspects of ageing and intergenerational solidarity alongside the recognition of the importance of family and state support to multigenerational families. Within this discourse it is also important to acknowledge those factors that can lead to an increase in ageism and negative relationships across the generations.

Ageing should be seen as a multidimensional process. Family support is more important than ever, for the young seeking employment, for grandparents who depend on children for housing and health care. Family is the basis of society and the relationships between generations that perpetuate this legacy over time. Factors such as migration and rapid urbanisation, lead to challenges to intergenerational solidarity, testing the relationships between grandparents, parents and children. A growing number of older people live alone or are institutionalised. Demographic change and the growing need for services for older people are financially burdening existing resources. With the promotion of more effective interventions, overall spending with this age group may be reduced. The view of ageing as a problem has to be replaced by an approach emphasising the positive aspects of life, even in the presence of poor health, and the older person as in control of his or her life.

The four distinct groups who engaged with the programme had differing perspectives on the importance and need to advocate for intergenerational policies.

Researchers

Portugal is the sixth most aged country in the world and fifth in Europe and there is a need to improve the links between research, intervention, policy and civil society concerning intergenerational issues. The question is if we are not simply ageing within the family as we have many people who are living alone. There is a need to improve services, which help families. We need to combat the isolation of families. At the same time we need to construct a new reality for Portugal that changing demography means that increasing numbers of people will be at risk of isolation as they age and the family cannot be the solution for everyone. Thinking about intergenerational solutions that exist in the community between non-biologically connected individuals will become increasingly important.

Policy makers

Ageing is not a problem; the problem facing us in Portugal is the very low-birth rate. We need to revision our society for the well-being of all – past, present and future generations – that reflects this changed reality. We need a mature discussion across the generations that considers issues such as end of life, the negative impact of social stigma and the idea of a wider community family that transcends biological connection.

We need to discuss these issues together. How do we use changes in urban planning and policy to stimulate and increase social participation. The gift of longevity is a great achievement of our society but we need to ensure it is a healthy long life. In considering this we need to understand the contribution that family and services can make.

It may take a village to educate a child, but we need to create a society of feelings and emotions. Family is the structure for our human being (protection and support) and our social system. We need to build a model based on positive ageing across the generations, giving people resilience and a strong sense of being part of wider society.

Practitioners

Ageing is not a disease but a natural consequence of living. Many seniors who are receiving care in their own homes do not go out. Grandparents are very important not only for the family but also for society. There is a need to develop our thinking about services that connect across the life course.

Migrants could help seniors at home while simultaneously learning the Portuguese language and culture. We have the solution of a model that reflects the family in our hands. Seniors have much to give to juniors and vice-versa. Do we know what it is to be a senior in Portugal? It is difficult to explain who is the senior. In our society in Portugal the family is the heart of everything: common growth, learning and anchorage.

Civil society

Portuguese society does not allow families to choose freely the number of children and there is a serious problem with increasing elder abuse. Seniors want to be useful for society. We are born and we die in the family. As demographic and family structures change our society becomes increasingly unsure of itself and it is our belief we need a new model of the intergenerational community family to help us find a new foundation for the future. Each family member shall be recognised as a gift. Family is the main lifeblood of our society. In 2050 Portugal will be the second most aged country in the world, it has to find a new way of being if this is not to become increasingly detrimental with a potentially devastating impact on the health and well-being of us all.

Summary

Portugal has been going through a period of unprecedented change as its population rapidly ages, family structures are weakened and concerns over the use of resources and potential competition between the generations has lead to an increase in ageism and all the problems associated with this. The creation of the advocacy group created a private space for professionals to explore and strengthen their understanding of the impact of these issues and the potential of approaching policy as an intergenerational issue as one solution.

The public events enriched this process and there was a clear appetite to strengthen our families and the intergenerational relationships across communities and to initiate a dialogue about how to create a new social reality that looked to the future and based on respect and opportunity for all our citizens irrespective of their age. Building on this work the group will continue to gather evidence, explore solutions and advocate to policy makers in Portugal for the need to take an integrated approach to creating healthier, better connected communities who can work together to use their shared assets for mutual gain.

Implications for practice

- given the rapidly changing and complex demography of Portugal it is essential to think across the whole community and seek solutions that promote interdependency and cooperation to counter generational competition;
- we need to develop training and campaigns to counter the ageism that has become so significant in our society; and
- only by pooling resources and thinking intergenerationally will we be able to deliver the opportunities and support that our citizens will need to enable them to age well across the life course.

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Further reading

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